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Ideologies and Discourses: Extreme Narratives in Extreme Metal Music

Abstract: Historically speaking, metal music has always been about provoking a strong reaction. Depending on the characteristics of different sub-genres, one can focus on the sound, technique, visual appearance, and furthermore, the ideologies and ideas that are the foundation for each of the sub-genres. Although the majority of the metal community rejects accusations of being racially intolerant, some ideologies of extreme sub-genres (such as black metal) are in fact formed around the ideas of self-conscious elitism expressed through interest in pagan mythology, racism, Nazism and fascism. There has been much interest in the Nazi era within the extreme metal scene thus influencing other sub-genres and artists. The aim of this paper is to examine various appearances of extreme narratives such as Nazism and racism in different sub-genres of metal, bearing in mind variations dependent on geographical, political, and other factors.

Keywords: extreme metal, extreme narratives, black metal, discourse, transgressions, Serbian black metal

Metal music¹ experienced an important breakthrough into mainstream media at the apex of its popularity in the 1980s, while at the same time being considered a subject of “media- and state- sponsored ‘moral panics’”² in the United States. The first decade of the new millennium witnessed a sort of focus shift in the mainstream music media, which signified a specific media *lull* regarding metal. A highly-developed, independent

¹ Authors usually use the term *heavy metal* to describe the entire genre. However, bearing in mind the specifics we can ascribe to every sub-genre that has developed over the years, as well as the positions and time distance we now have, I will use the term heavy metal to describe one particular sub-genre that is an important part of the metal (meta)genre.

² Keith Kahn-Harris, Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford–New York, Berg, 2007, 1.

system of production and distribution created by those within the metal community also had a considerable influence on the withdrawal of the metal music scene away from the general public. Officially, the era of moral panic caused by metal was over. However, a new wave of controversy in the US came in the beginning of 2016, when one of the most influential metal musicians, Phil Anselmo,³ gave a Nazi salute and shouted “white power” during an annual memorial concert, *Dimebash*.⁴ Members of the community, musicians and fans, condemned this act, prompting Anselmo’s further statements and public apology. It was not the first time for Anselmo to insinuate or openly *preach white power* discourse, which was always followed by apologies and excuses.⁵ Accordingly, questions were raised: is this type of discourse characteristic of the metal community, and what are the possible roots and impacts of racism in metal music?

The majority of the metal community rejects accusations of being racially intolerant. However, some of ideologies of extreme sub-genres are in fact formed around the ideas of self-conscious elitism expressed through interest in, on the one hand, the *pre-Christian aura* of pagan mythology, and, on the other, racism, Nazism and fascism. The aim of this paper is to examine various appearances of these extreme narratives in sub-genres of metal (such as *black metal*), bearing in mind variations dependent on geographical, political, and other factors. Instead of focusing on the sound of metal music, I will discuss its discursive production of meaning, which although (musically) silenced, screams for media attention, thus causing moral panics and public concern.

Groups of extremes (narratives, sub-genres)

Guided by the adjective *extreme* while examining this subject, I first tend to pose questions of possible *extremeness* in music as well as in its (political) narratives and ideologies. In attempt to define the group of *extreme narratives* (racism, Nazism, fascism, etc.), I relied upon Carol Tator’s interpretation of Fiske’s and Foucault’s understanding of *racist discourse*. Namely, Tator’s interpretations state that these “[...] discourses repress, marginalize, and invalidate differences/others” through an identifiable repertoire of practices.⁶ Thus, extreme narratives are perceived as the narratives that contribute to creating discourses of repression, marginalization and invalidation of differences. As previously stated, these narratives are deeply embedded in the

³ Philip H. Anselmo is best known as the singer of bands Pantera, Down, and numerous projects and collaborations.

⁴ The event is a tribute to the late Pantera guitarist Dimebag Darrell (1966–2004), who was shot and killed during a 2004 concert with his other band, Damageplan. He is considered one of the most influential metal guitarists of all time.

⁵ Anselmo named the act as an ‘inside joke’, that was inspired by white wine. More: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gShmJV2BSr0>

⁶ Tator, Carol (eds.), “Theoretical Perspectives”, in: *Challenging Racism in the Arts: Case studies of Controversy and Conflict*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1998, 18–35, 27.

ideology of the extreme metal sub-genre, *black metal*, as we will see further in the text. Through analyzing extreme metal discourse and its *transgressions*, extreme narratives are indicated as a consequential element worthy of further discussions.

The term *extreme metal* is used as a collective name for the group of several metal sub-genres. Kahn-Harris perceived “musical radicalism” as the common feature that distinguishes them from other sub-genres of metal.⁷ Simultaneously, extreme metal represents sort of a cluster of forms with various historical backgrounds and contexts. This group of sub-genres (*death metal*, *black metal*, *doom metal*, *grindcore*, and their variants) shows the highest level of diversity, artistic vibrancy and dynamics, while at the same time being the most problematic area of metal culture in general.⁸ Unlike the sub-genres that experienced mainstream popularity (classic, heavy, glam, and thrash metal), and, even paradoxically, were the object of attacks and public disapproval, extreme metal was situated on the periphery of the music industry, thus forming its own institutional network for creating, distributing, popularizing, and consuming music.

Extreme sub-genres of metal (meta) genre / scenes and transgressions of extreme metal

Finding it necessary to complement and strengthen Fabbri’s definition of genre as “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules”⁹, in which we can also define a sub-set, that is, a sub-genre that functions within that kind of system, I will add concepts of *scene* and *transgression*, which were in more detail elaborated by sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris.

In an attempt to define their environment, members of the extreme metal community most commonly use the mentioned spatial concept of *scene* (also, *the underground*). This term is used for various modes of describing “the context within which extreme metal music, practices and discourses are produced”¹⁰. In global terms, the extreme metal scene is viewed as an assemblage of all local scenes based on the production and consumption of a particular extreme metal sub-genre.¹¹

The second term that I stated as relevant is the concept of *transgression*, referring to the diversity of phenomena proven to test and exceed boundaries. The concepts considered as forms of transgression in extreme metal tend to be the exact reason to classify those sub-genres in the ‘extreme’ category. Certainly, sonic/sound transgressions are the most expected (use of certain scales and modes, playing and

⁷ Keith Kahn-Harris, op. cit., 5.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Franco Fabbri, “A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications”, in: David Horn and Philip Tagg (eds.), *Popular Music Perspectives*, Göteborg–Exeter, International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1981, 52–81, 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

vocal techniques, rhythm and tempo, songwriting, etc.). On the other hand, extreme metal practices particularly important forms of discursive transgressions, and, to a lesser extent, bodily transgressions. Given that this scene produces an enormous amount of non-musical texts through a variety of media (band names, song titles and lyrics,¹² everyday behavior, magazines, fanzines, blogs, record labels, etc.), sub-genres of extreme metal are distinguished from e.g. heavy and thrash metal by sharpening and intensifying the discourse.¹³

Taking into account all musical, and, in particular, non-musical discursive parameters, it can be stated that *black metal* is the most *radically transgressive* sub-genre of extreme metal. As I stated in the beginning, *black metal* discourse is built on an idea of self-conscious elitism and misanthropy, at the same time exploiting thematic fields of Satanism, occultism and paganism. Discursive transgressions fashioned in such a manner are often aimed to discursive domains of Nazism, racism, and fascism, ideologies that are, to a greater or lesser extent, transparent in the musical product itself. Depending on geopolitical position, narratives of *black metal* vary slightly, adapting to the environment, political discourses, and audience and industry requirements. Further, I will examine the formation of *black metal* ideology in Norway and its echoes and transpositions in Serbian metal scene.

Norwegian black metal – extreme transgressions

Nicolas Goodrick-Clark detects roots of the Nazi and racist ideology of *black metal* in *skinhead* movements and *white power* music that emerged in Great Britain in late 1970s.¹⁴ Troubled working-class white youth that felt the need to compensate personal failures and social inadequacy with violence and aggressive behavior became a new audience for Hitler cults and notions of Aryan identity. Over time, these movements became militant and aggressively advertised through developed networks of media, which led to a large number of supporters throughout Europe. Initially, those networks were found in countries such as Germany and Sweden, but by the early 1990s, they spread throughout the ‘new’ states of Eastern Europe, in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Serbia.¹⁵

¹² Album cover designs are also indicative. Covers were one of the most important elements against which conservatives, religious fundamentalists and liberals of the left wing joined forces in the 1980s. Cf. Stuart Bortvik i Ron Moj, *Popularni muzički žanrovi* (trans. by Aleksandra Čabreja i Vesna Mikić), Beograd, Clio, 2010, 173.

¹³ Concretely, lyric themes of death metal are explicitly satanic and glorify suicide (Decide), they also deal with murders and death (Cannibal Corpse, Death, Obituary, Dismember, etc.), human anatomy (Carcass), and so on. Doom metal lyrics accentuate the inevitability of mortality and decay. A fascination with the apocalypse, millenarianism, war, military tactics and technology are also noticeable (Bolt Thrower). Surely, thematic frames are expandable and do not depend on sub-genre explicitly.

¹⁴ Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity*, New York–London, New York University Press, 2002, 194.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 195.

Misanthropic *zeitgeist* became the foundation of the *black metal* ideology¹⁶ developed in Norway. In the mid-1980s, inspired by the main representatives of the first wave of black metal such as British band Venom and Swedish band Bathory, the second wave of Norwegian *black metal* bands began to emerge. As their most significant discursive characteristic we perceive the idea of merging satanic and occult ideologies with Nordic mythology and fascination with the Scandinavian countryside. A prominent discursive feature of one of the most influential bands, Mayhem,¹⁷ and many in the offing (Emperor, Enslaved, Immortal, Arcturus, Burzum, Darkthrone, etc.) is a distinctive philosophy of nihilist hatred impregnated with depression and morbidity (the “negative side of [the] Scandinavian psyche”¹⁸).

It can be said that this circle did not include a large number of musicians; nevertheless, they managed to build the type of infrastructure needed for their scene to function.¹⁹ Until the 1990s, the above-mentioned bands created their own identity based on the idea of superiority over mainstream culture, modern (mostly Christian) religion, and other metal sub-genres. This idea was deeply rooted in the interpretation of geographical position, purity of nature and landscapes, as well as Viking and Nordic mythology. Accordingly, superiority and elitism applied to musical skills, as well as racial qualifications.²⁰ The most prominent members of this scene, like Euronymous and Varg Vikernes, advocated a need to annul the effect of Christian *colonization* of Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. Bearing that thought in mind, in the early 1990s several attacks on Christian churches throughout Norway began. Centuries-old churches were burnt. These events caused panics in public circles, and led to unimagined media attention to the nascent *black metal* scene.²¹

The interest within the scene in pagan mythology rapidly evolved into extreme discourses. Through an obsession with the pagan past and “pure” landscapes, as well as openly expressed distrust towards cosmopolitanism and ‘Americanization’, the scene established strong ideological connections with the nationalistic ideas of the 19th and fascist and racist movements of 20th century.²² Nazi ideology, supported by

¹⁶ Kahn-Harris considers this ideology rather as a set of referential points than coherent doctrine. Cf. Keith Kahn Harris, op. cit., 38.

¹⁷ In addition to violent stage performances, Mayhem gained infamy due to the suicide of band’s vocalist “Dead” (Per Yngve Ohlin) in 1991, as well as murder of guitarist “Euronymous” (Øystein Aarseth) by Varg Vikernes of Burzum, in 1993.

¹⁸ Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke, op. cit., 204.

¹⁹ Namely, Euronymous, Mayhem’s guitarist and co-founder, founded the extreme metal record label *Deathlike Silence Productions* and the record shop *Helvete*, which became gathering place for youths drawn to this ideology.

²⁰ Karl Beckwith, “Black Metal is for White People”, *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2002, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0207/blackmetal.php>, ac. 16 April 2016.

²¹ The murder of Euronymous by Vikernes also drew considerable media attention (1993). That same year, Vikernes was convicted of murder and at least three counts of arson (of churches) and was sentenced to a maximum 21 years in prison.

²² Cf. Keith Kahn-Harris, op. cit., 41.

characteristic readings of Darwinism, found its way to the musicians²³ and audience alike.

The last decade of 20th century was truly the time during which the most extreme and the most intense discursive transgressions in *black metal* occurred. The impact of this ideology was evident not only in the technical aspect of the music, visual imagery, and ideas of central to the scene, but also in the concrete actions and criminal acts that remained a feature of the Norwegian extreme scene as well. The ideology and sound of *black metal* are considered genuine *Norwegian products*, that is, the result of the synergy between contempt for other metal sub-genres and distinctive interpretations of pagan mythologies, extreme-right oriented ideas, in relation to the Norwegian landscape, and the lonesome psyche of that landscape. However, through the institutional network of the underground, Norwegian metal reaches fans all over the world. Fascinated musicians and listeners hence tried to adapt its ideology on their own themes and thoughts, political and social questions.

Serbia – Pan-Slavism and nationalism

An attempt to apply some of the primary postulates of *black metal* ideology to a 'local' context is noticeable in Serbia as well. The most important feature lies in marking Slavic paganism as a starting point. Emphasizing Pan-Slavism accesses an even larger political and geographical space, thus opening the door to the great music scene of *Slavic extreme metal*.

Regarding the local scene in Serbia, it is necessary to stress that the number of bands working along the lines of this ideology is proportionally small, hence the non-existence of larger record labels,²⁴ fanzines, magazines and related media, dedicated to this particular field of extreme metal. Musicians, fans, magazines and musical events (concerts and festivals) are elements of one fluid entity that functions as a whole, despite the original differences in genre and ideology. Due to the closeness of subcultures it can be noticed that some of the discursive transgressions of Serbian extreme metal are influenced by skinhead movements associated with the genres of *Oi!* punk and *hardcore*.²⁵

By examining the work of some of the most prominent and active bands of the sub-genre in Serbia from the late 1990s until today (The Stone, May Result, Simargal,

²³ Burzum and Polish band Graveland actively participated in politics, representing the radical right; Swedish band Marduk expressed admiration for German war equipment (album *Panzer Division Marduk*); Darkthrone put the slogan "Norsk Arisk Black Metal" (Nordic Aryan black metal) on the cover of their album *Transylvanian Hunger*, and so on.

²⁴ Bands such as The Stone and May Result released their albums on record labels from Greece (Demonion Productions), Austria (CCP Records), Germany (Solistitium Records), and so on.

²⁵ In Serbia, skinheads appeared during the 1980s. Roughly divided, four basic groups are distinguishable: politically active, trendy, fans of *Oi!* music, and United Force (football hooligans). More: <http://www.nin.co.rs/2000-07/13/13588.html>

Wolf's Hunger, Svartgren, Kolac, etc.), two ideological directions are singled out. On the one hand are bands heavily influenced by Norwegian *black metal*, through which they comprehended ideologies of Satanism and paganism and tried to enforce them through their own extreme music style. On the other hand, bands strongly influenced by neo-Nazi ideas of the skinhead movement and utilizing music as a means of expression and placement of unity and superiority of Pan-Slavism (e.g. the idea of Wolf Hunger's *patriotic black metal*).

The most noticeable discursive transgressions occur in the area of song themes and lyrics, which are indicative of local characteristics and geopolitical position. Likewise, references to historical events and mythological symbols are important aspects of Serbian extreme metal. One of the features supporting that statement is the language the songs are written in. A significant number of lyrics are written in Serbian, especially if mythology and Pan-Slavism are the topics (The Stone, "Slavic blood" / *Slovenska krv*, 2002/; "The Law of Veles" / *Zakon Velesa*, 2004/). Commitment to Slavic gods is also connected to anti-Christian and satanic narratives (May Result, "Sacrilege" / *Svetogrđe*, 2004/).

Although the relationship between sources of influence has never been completely and precisely defined, there is a breakthrough of extreme-right oriented ideas, together with Slavic mythology and Serbian history. For example, by analyzing Wolf's Hunger's songs "Thunders of Perun are Back" and "Great Serbia", this paradoxical combination can be observed. The first song begins with Ljubomir Simović's lyrics "Hriste bože raspeti i sveti"²⁶ from the famous Serbian movie "Battle of Kosovo" (*Bojna Kosovo*, 1989), and later the lyrics praise Perun's army, united Slavic winds from Russia, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the very end, the burning of the "holy land of Israel" is mentioned. Two chosen songs contain elements of nationalism, racism and antisemitism:

"[...] United by pure Slav blood,
Perun calls his Aryan children, under the banner of Kolovrat we ride!" ("The Thunder...");
Follow this path for a greater Serbia
And to cleanse our roots!
Forward to war for a greater Serbia,
forward to war for a White Europe!" (Great Serbia)

Considering recent Serbian history and politics, odium towards Americanization and globalization is detected, as well as directing creative forces to Slavic countries (mostly Russia, song lyrics and record labels) and the Pan-Slavic-pagan metal scene. Locally, these bands coexist with other genres, in that way being included into two streams of musical events – that which forms the Serbian extreme metal scene in

²⁶ Chosen stanzas do not directly reference Christianity. This song was also used as an anthem by Special Operations Unit (Serbia), an elite special forces police unit of the FR Yugoslav State Security Service (RDB).

general, and that which isn't necessarily extreme in terms of sub-genre but supports ideologies of paganism and nationalism.

Towards new questions

The question of transgressions in extreme metal genres is always current, moreover if it comes to their sonic or discursive forms. After the 'most extreme', second wave of Norwegian *black metal*, associated crimes and riots appeared to calm and, thanks to the fluidity of genres, the extreme narratives within extreme metal actually *softened*. However, as is demonstrated in the text, multiple appearances of these narratives can be found within the contemporary metal music genre. Thus, discussions on contextual relocation and adapting of extremist ideologies are to be current, especially when they are set in politically unstable periods of history. While observing the stage presence of one Serbian *black metal* band's front-man, anthropologist David Jo Murphy stated that "under different circumstances this kind of charisma would easily lead man into a battle"²⁷, thus contributing the importance of discursive analysis application to the realm of *extremeness* in the metal music industry. Artistic and musical discourses can, even in the cases like this one, represent "perfect artistic simulations of political activism"²⁸, but, at the same time, they can indicate deeper disturbances and problems that warrant consideration.

²⁷ David Jo Murphy, *Hate Culture: Subcultural Fundamentalism and the Serbian Black Metal Scene*, Maynooth, Nui Maynooth, 2011, 108.

²⁸ Cf. Philipp Kleinmichel, "Artists as Activists: The Simulation of Politics and its Value", *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 7, 2015, 13–20, 14.